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—THE TRIBUNE CREDO

THE CLOUT

A number of Chicago's leading business men have shown us telegrams they received from Gen. Lucius Clay. These messages solicited [to use a polite word] contributions [to use another polite word] to a special ransom fund demanded by Fidel Castro.

Gen. Clay's story goes like this: When Castro, some months ago, released 60 sick and crippled victims of the Bay of Pigs misadventure, he did so on a promise from the Committee of Cuban Families to pay him $2,925,000 ransom. He hasn't received the money. He did let about half the remaining prisoners come to the United States before he announced that no more could leave Cuba unless the $2,925,000 was immediately forthcoming.

Gen. Clay thereupon agreed "for the sake of humanity" to raise the money. Hence his telegrams to corporation executives. He says he borrowed the $2,925,000 on his own account from two New York banks which had faith in his ability to repay the sum promptly. More than half of it, indeed, was raised on Christmas eve by means of telephone calls from an improvised office in Washington.

The rest of the message strikes us as of such great importance that it should be quoted in full. It is unpunctuated and we have supplied all the punctuation:

"Now we are asking for your help to pay off the loan. At my request, International Rescue committee has undertaken to assist Cuban Families committee in quickly raising this amount. Please advise by wire of any amount you feel you can contribute and please send it to Committee of Cuban Families, care Grace National bank, New York 7, N. Y. Contributions are tax deductible. For your information only, corporate gifts already received have ranged from ten to one hundred fifty thousand."

This message can be read as an appeal for a contribution. It can also be read as a truly shocking exhibition of the use of the political clout for purposes of shakedown.

Gen. Clay is not just another retired army officer. He is a man of great force and ability who has been used by the Kennedy administration repeatedly as a trouble shooter. The corporation executives receiving the message did not have to be told that the general is close to the President and that the President and his brother, the attorney general, feel a personal responsibility for the freeing of the Cubans. The Kennedys brought on the trouble when support for the invasion was withdrawn at the last minute; now, for reasons, perhaps of conscience and perhaps of politics, they are determined to make amends, as best they can, with the help of other people's money.

When O. W. Wilson became superintendent of the Chicago police department one of his first orders was to forbid the sale by policemen of tickets to a policemen's benefit. That was a racket, shakedown but Mr. Wilson knows that all shakedowns by government officials are vicious. The Kennedys take a much more tolerant view of the practice. They seem to think that if the shakedown is in a defensible cause it is a defensible shakedown and the bigger the better.

"Contributions are deductible," says the telegram, as if to emphasize that it is not just Gen. Clay but the administration itself that is determined to have the dough collected. The ordinary charity doesn't get clearance that fast.

"For your information only, corporate gifts already received have ranged from ten to one hundred fifty thousand dollars," the message concludes. Whose money? It doesn't belong to the corporation executives to whom the message was addressed, but to their stockholders. Some shareowners may wish to help the Cubans and some may not, but it is quite certain that none of them invested with the idea that the companies' resources would be given away to ransom anyone.

The corporation executives know this and might be expected to hoot at the request except for the clout with which it is delivered. Not many business leaders these days will lightly venture to buck the will of the men who run the federal government. The risks of persecution and prosecution are too great. The government can punish in many ways. There are anti-trust laws, tax laws, the security and exchange law, the labor laws, the food and drug law, the banking laws, and a hundred others which can be used to harass recalcitrants. There are also orders and contracts to be withheld.

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By the same token, the government can also confer favors. It can give a pass, as the saying goes, to its friends. It can contract for goods and services from preferred corporations.

It is these circumstances that explain the readiness of business men to come across with sums which, "for your information only" range from $10,000 to $150,000.

Just about the first job that faces the new Congress is to organize an investigation of this and other aspects of our relations with Cuba. The people are entitled to know which corporations were solicited and how much each of them handed over. How much did the treasury lose by these transactions? What promises, if any, were made in return for contributions?

The investigation should not end there. Congress should also find out, if it can, what the President meant in his speech to the Bay of Pigs survivers at the mass meeting in Miami. In accepting the brigade's flag he said:

"I can assure you that this flag will be returned to this brigade in a free Havana."

That could be a mere expression of hope. It could also be a promise to drive Castro from Cuba. Was Mr. Kennedy saying that he will use the clout of the United States army, navy, and air force to free Cuba as his friends have already used the administration's political clout to ransom Cubans?

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